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ABSTRACT

This study investigated verbal behavior of five third-grade children representing three cultural groups: Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and white. Ten sessions involving various language arts activities were tape recorded over a five-week period; session 7 was also videotaped. Sessions 3 to 10 involved group interaction across three interaction patterns: adult-dominated, peer-dominated, and adult-balanced. Results indicated that children produced more complex speech when allowed to interact with each other, free of the dominance of an adult; that no particular type of culture was better able to deal with the language experiences than any other; that the presence of an adult in an autocratic role influenced the production of standard English constructions over black English vernacular; and that the black children were comfortable with standard English forms, although they tended to speak black English vernacular with white as well as with black children. (Author/AA)

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Abstract

A STUDY OF RESPONSE TO LITERATURE ACROSS THREE SOCIAL INTERACTION PATTERNS: A DIRECTIONAL EFFORT[1]

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This study investigated verbal behavior in the context of a multi-cultural peer group, experiencing and manipulating language across three social interaction patterns. Five third-grade children at an urban elementary school in Philadelphia were involved in the study. The children represented three cultural groups: Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean and White. The study was conducted over a period of 5 weeks for a total of 10 sessions. All sessions were tape-recorded and Session 7 was video-taped. Sessions 1 and 2 comprised the Preliminary Interviews. Sessions 3-10 involved group interaction across the following three interaction patterns. (1) Adult-Dominated Social Situation; (2) Peer-Dominated Social Situation; and (3) Adult-Balanced Social Situation. All transcribed data were submitted to qualitative and quantitative analyses. Results of the analyses suggested a direct relationship between the structure of the social interaction pattern and its consequence in verbal behavior.

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[1]Paper delivered at Twenty-Second Annual Convention, International Reading Association, Miami Beach, Florida, May 5, 1977.

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A STUDY OF RESPONSE TO LITERATURE ACROSS THREE SOCIAL INTERACTION PATTERNS: A DIRECTIONAL EFFORT[1]

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The primacy of oral language has emerged as an important consequence of the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspective in the teaching of reading/language arts. Morton Botel and John Dawkins (1973) have enumerated the pedagogical principles that result from the notion of the primacy of oral language:

(1) A child's oral language competence is far in advance of his ability to read.

(2) Oral language uses more systems of communication than written language.

(3) Oral language underlies written language.

(4) Reading literature to children serves as a model for the child.

(5) A child's interest is more easily sustained during oral work.

(6) A child is less inhibited and more fluent in oral language activities.

(7) Oral communication helps create a classroom climate for the open-ended communication of ideas.

A particularly provocative consequence of the new role of oral communication in the classroom has been the issue of non-standard English dialects. A number of theorists have argued in favor of a social pathology or deficit model with respect to Black English Vernacular (BEV) which suggests that the vernacular

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is a sloppy, illogical mode of expression, incapable of expressing rational thought. Such a view would, by definition, preclude the acceptance of many of the principles established in the primacy of oral language. Foremost among linguists who have exposed the notions of the deprivation theorists as erroneous and contrived is William Labov who, in a classic paper, "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (Labov, 1972), reports evidence derived from working with 8 and 9 year olds in the Harlen community which suggests that"... the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behavior and that an adult must enter into the right social relation with a child if he wants to find out what a child can do."

This study investigated three sociolinguistic patterns-- cross-cultural peer group interaction, language arts instruction through a rich, varied experience with language activities, social environment as a condition for learning-- that are of particular relevance to researchers and classroom teachers concerned with stimulating oral communication and group process in the classroom. Four questions were investigated: (1) What is the effect of peer group interaction and the type of social interaction pattern on the level of verbality and verbosity expressed by a multi-cultural group of 7-9 year olds engaged in language arts activities? (2) Are there any behavioral differences on the measures of verbality and verbosity across cultural groups? (3) Are there any behavioral differences in the ability to deal with abstract or complex conceptual ideas across cultural groups? and (4) How does the frequency of occurrence of grammatical constructions in BEV change over the three patterns of social interaction for speakers of the vernacular?

METHOD

Subjects

A total of 5 children were involved in the study, 2 girls and 3 boys. The children represented three cultural groups: Afro-American (AA), Afro-Caribbean (AC) and White (W). Four of the children were Black (AA and AC) and one was White. The children ranged in age from 7-9 years old, and they were all selected from the same third-grade classroom at an urban elementary school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Materials

Materials for reading and discussion were provided by the following: (1) Level 3 of the D.C. Heath Communicating Series; (2) children's books supplied by the subjects; and (3) the personal experiences of the subjects.

Procedure

The study was conducted over a period of 5 weeks for a total of 10 sessions (See Table 1). The investigator met with the children twice weekly for approximately one hour each session. The group was removed from the classroom and taken to the book-room for each of the sessions. All transactions between investigator and children or between children were tape-recorded, and Session 7 was video-taped. Sessions 1 and 2 comprised the Preliminary Interviews. The specific steps followed in the Preliminary Interviews were: (1) The poem, "A Lazy Thought," was read by the investigator to each subject; (2) The poem was then recited by each subject to the investigator; and (3) A series of questions dealing with the content and meaning of the poem were posed to the subject in an attempt to stimulate discussion. The remaining sessions, 3-10, involved group inter-

TABLE 1

OVERVIEW OF EXPERIMENTAL SESSIONS

Session	Objective	Social Interaction Pattern	Language Arts Material	Language Activity
1	Preliminary Interview	Adult-Dominated Social Situation	Poetry: "A Lazy Thought," E. Merriam	Discussion
2	Preliminary Interview	Adult-Dominated Social Situation	Poetry: "A Lazy Thought," E. Merriam	Discussion
3	Group Interaction	Adult-Dominated Social Situation	Fable: "Androcles and the Lion," Aesop "Waggles and the Dog Catcher," M. Cook	Discussion Dramatizatio Retelling a Story
4	Group Interaction	Peer-Dominated Social Situation	A Realistic Story: "A Penny's Worth of Character," J. Stuart	Dramatizatio Group Composition
5	Group Interaction	Peer-Dominated Social Situation	A Play: "Tom-Tit-Tot," Adapted	Group Composition Discussion
6	Group Interaction	Peer-Dominated Social Situation	Children's Personal Experience: "Staying Out Too Late and Its Consequences"	Dramatizatio (Rehearsal for Videotap Session)
7	Videotape Session	Adult-Dominated Social Situation Peer-Dominated Social Situation Adult-Balanced Social Situation	Children's Personal Experience, A Myth: "The Story of the First Woodpecker," Adapted	Dramatizatic Discussion
8	Group Interaction	Adult-Balanced Social Situation	Children's Personal Views: "Heaven and Hell"	Discussion
9	Group Interaction	Adult-Balanced Social Situation	Language: "Code Writing	Discussion Problem-Solving
10	Group Interaction	Adult-Balanced Social Situation	Children's Personal Views on people from other cultures and Thanksgiving	Disscussion Dramatizatic

action across three social interaction patterns. Pattern 1 (P-1) was the Adult-Dominated Social Situation, typical of most classroom situations. In Pattern 1, the investigator occupied the leadership position in the group, posing questions, selecting participants for various language activities, etc. Pattern 2 (P-2) was the Peer-Dominated Social Situation. After reading any introductory material or posing a problem to be solved by the children, the investigator left the group entirely, leaving them to work out a solution among themselves. Finally, Pattern 3 (P-3) was the Adult-Balanced Social Situation. In this pattern, a second adult was brought in to interact with the children. This adult was known to the children as a person who played games and other "fun" activities with another group of children from the subjects' classroom. Thus, it was felt that this adult could more readily enter into a balanced or non-teacher-oriented type of social situation with the subjects. Specifically, the role of this adult was to act as a facilitator or resource person in the group; this adult presented introductory reading materials and actively participated in the resulting language arts activities under the leadership of the children.

All transcribed data were submitted to quantitative and qualitative analyses. The Syntactic Complexity Formula (Botel, Dawkins, Granowsky, 1973) was applied to every fifth utterance produced by each subject in a given session as a means of ranking the syntactic structures resulting from the children's responses (See Tables 2 and 3). The speech produced by the Black subjects was analyzed for the presence of grammatical constructions in BEV (See Table 4). In order to evaluate the children's capacity

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY LEVELS ACROSS CULTURAL GROUPS

Subject	Culture	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 8	Session 9	Session 10
TC	AA	0.00	a	1.44	.78	1.09	.80	1.37	1.50	.75
SQ	AA	a	.83	.20	1.20	.66	b	.44	0.00	b
LP	AC	a	0.00	.17	.71	2.45	0.00	1.50	0.00	.55
ZM	AA	3.00	a	.80	b	b	1.50	2.86	1.40	.86
RF	W	1.00	a	b	.62	b	1.25	.87	.25	1.11

[a]Preliminary Interview data collected for only Session 1 or Session 2

[b]Subject absent

TABLE 3

SUMMARY OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY LEVELS ACROSS THREE PATTERNS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Subject	Culture	Pattern 1(P-1)	Pattern 2 (P-2)	Pattern 3 (P-3)
TC	AA	.72	.89	1.13
SQ	AA	.51	.93	a
LP	AC	.08	1.05	.27
ZM	AA	1.90	b	1.13
RF	W	a	.93	.68

[a]Subject absent for 1 of 2 sessions in P-1 or P-3

[b]Subject absent for 2 of 3 sessions in P-2

TABLE 4

SUMMARY OF AVERAGE COUNT OF BEV GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTIONS ACROSS THREE PATTERNS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Subject	Pattern 1 (P-1)	Pattern 2 (P-2)	Pattern 3 (P-3)
TC	5.0	24.5	5.0
SQ	8.5	8.0	b
LP	7.0	14.0	4.5
ZM	8.5	a	11.0

[a]Subject absent for 2 of 3 sessions in P-2

[b]Subject absent for 1 of 2 sessions in P-3

for logical thought, qualitative analysis of a selected transcript dealing with a problematical issue was made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the analyses suggested the following: (1) Children tend to produce more complex speech when they are allowed to interact with each other, free of the dominance of an adult; (2) No particular type of linguistic structure is specially suited to any particular type of culture and no particular type of culture is better able to deal with the language experiences in the D.C. Heath Communicating Series than any other; (3) No particular type of culture has a monopoly on the ability to deal with abstract or complex conceptual ideas through language; (4) the presence of an adult in an autocratic role can influence the production of so-called standard English (SE) constructions over BEV constructions; (5) Black children appear to be comfortable with SE forms although they tend to speak BEV when interacting with White as well as Black children (see Hall and Freedle, 1973); and (6) four topics which are effective in getting children to talk involve a consideration of death, the danger of death, the threat of physical violence and moral indignation. The findings generally suggest that the universality of the reading/language arts material and its relevance to the actual experiences of the children is as important a variable in stimulating verbality and verbosity as is the provision for uninhibited peer group interaction.

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